

REMINISCENCES OF THE CHICAGO FIRE.

As the anniversary of the great Chicago Fire comes around each year, my memory goes back to the ninth of October in 1871. I was a stranger in Chicago at the time, here only five or six weeks, and therefore knew but little of the city. But my experiences of that night and of the winter that followed will never be effaced.

The building of the former St. Mary's Seminary of the Lake, situated on the corner of State and Superior Streets, the present site of the Cathedral, had been given over for the use of the orphans. This home, the St. Joseph's Orphan Asylum, was under the direction of the Sisters of St. Joseph. Mother Mary Joseph, assisted by fourteen sisters was in charge of the institution. At that time it housed two hundred eighty children, ranging in age from three weeks to eighteen years, some of whom were feeble-minded and crippled.

At about nine o'clock on Sunday evening, October ninth, all the inmates had retired for the night excepting Sister Michael and myself who still had some duties to perform. On entering one of the large dormitories, Sister noticed a strange glow on the south side and remarked that there must be a fire down town. While we were watching, we noticed people out on the street, but as the flames seemed to be at a distance, we felt in no way alarmed. The fire, however, kept gaining headway and the excitement out on the street increased.

The noise and restlessness of the people gave us to understand that it was no ordinary fire. We called the sisters. Merely for the sake of safety we then got the children up and dressed, which was no easy task, as they were in their first sleep and hard to awaken. Some, in fact, fell asleep while dressing, and crawled into or even under the beds for more rest. All the while we were careful not to mention "fire" in order to prevent a panic among the children. Since the flames kept spreading, our great care was to make the Blessed Sacrament secure. Our chaplain, the Reverend Father Guerin, (I am not certain of the spelling) did not appear, notwithstanding the danger of our home by that time. So with heroic effort Mother Mary Joseph crossed the street in the face of the high, destructive wind which was raging, with the intention of calling a priest. At the housekeeper's repeated assertions that all the priests had gone out to save the Blessed Sacrament in churches and chapels Mother Mary Joseph insisted that Father Guerin must be at home. Firm in the conviction that Father's first thought would be our chapel she prevailed on the housekeeper to take her to his room. After several loud cries of "Fire" and strong blows against the door Father Guerin was at last roused from a deep sleep, which would surely have been his death had Mother Mary Joseph not been so determined.

As soon as he awakened to the danger, he seized his cassock and slippers and a few minutes later saved the Blessed Sacrament from our chapel. But he could not return to his room again, for it was in the power of the flames. Meanwhile all the sisters and children had assembled in the chapel on the first floor nearest the exit. Feeling that the chapel was the greatest place of safety, all remained there until the danger of being burned was imminent.

At one o'clock the waterworks behind our property took fire, and even in our barnyard three loads of hay which had been brought in the previous afternoon was ablaze. It was high time for us to leave. Each sister carried two infants. The larger boys and girls took charge of the smaller ones and we formed a close line of march, after receiving strict orders to hold on to one another. With Mother Mary Joseph in the lead we started northward, not knowing whereto we were going. Mad rushin of people, some jumping through the windows to save their lives, weird crying and howling, the hurrying of horses and vehicles made it almost impossible to keep together. The greatest difficulty was at the street crossings.

One incident of many is worth relating. A team of horses was rushing towards us on the right and one on the left. As there was danger of breaking our group and therefore of losing some of the children, Mother Mary Joseph stepped up before the horses and asked both drivers to halt in God's Name. One graciously submitted but the other roused no doubt by the danger of the situation tried to go on. Mother Mary Joseph boldly stepped up, took the horses by the bridle while he continued to beat the horses. Passersby seeing the situation, tore the driver from his seat, and gave him what he so richly deserved. I can still hear Mother saying: "Give it to him but don't kill him, he's not worth it." While this was going on, we seized our opportunity and got across. Imagine us, trying to make our way with burning buildings on each side of us and plankwalks burning at intervals underneath. The flames like serpents crawled around the buildings.

After traveling in this way until four o'clock in the morning we found ourselves outside the city limits on a prairie many miles out of the city. Sheer exhaustion compelled us to rest now that we had made a considerable advance beyond the fire zone. The sky was hot and a lurid red, the sun that morning rose like a ball of fire, the ground was warm, but notwithstanding, the children fell asleep as soon as they found a place to lay their tired heads.

Between eight and nine in the morning we saw in the distance two men on horseback coming toward us. As they approached we recognized two Jesuit priests, the Reverend Father O'Neil and Father Van Eyck, who have since then gone to their eternal reward. Until then they had made a fruitless search for the orphans. Imagine their joy and ours, since they had found those for whom they had sought, and when we learned that they offered to bring us unexpected but much needed relief. They requested us not to go any farther while they would return to their home on Twelfth Street, intending to send two Fathers with a conveyance to take us to some place of safety.

In the meantime Mother Mary Joseph had given our hired-man, who had succeeded in saving our horse and buggy and had found us, some money with the injunction to get provisions in the city and return as soon as possible to the starving children. But such was our fate that the horse ran away, the buggy was burned, and the hired-man, Mr. Sullivan did not come back to us till three months later.

St. Joseph's Home for the Friendless

739 East 35th Street

Chicago

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At four o'clock in the afternoon the Jesuits brought several spring wagons and other vehicles they could procure and all were taken to the Jesuit College on Twelfth and May Streets. At our arrival about eleven o'clock that night we were welcomed most heartily by all the Fathers and students who had labored all day long changing the classrooms into living apartments for the children.

There we remained for two weeks while an old two-story frame schoolbuilding about two blocks away was prepared for a temporary home for the winter. The lack of commodious quarters necessitated our accepting the offers of aid from Orphanages in Cincinnati and St. Louis. One hundred children were sent to each place, while eighty of the smallest stayed with us. Considering all the hardships we endured from the night of the fire on through the bitter cold of the winter, the Providence of God and our dear father St. Joseph watched over us, for not a life was lost, nor did a single child get sick.

The following May we were permanently established in what had been the Old Soldier's Home, the present St. Joseph's Home for the Friendless. The commodious building enabled us to welcome back the two hundred children who had been cared for in Cincinnati and St. Louis. The new institution was known thereafter as the St. Joseph's Orphan Asylum.

*(Home of the Friendless - in Chapter on
"Benevolent Institutions.")*

2 (10) Thirty-fifth & Lake St.